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Diary of François Tancock

BY

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POLITICAL AND ECONOMIC SCIENCE IN THE  
UNIVERSITY, KINGSTON, ONTARIO, CANADA.

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## THE DIARY OF FRANCIS DICKENS

BY VERNON LACHANCE

THE winter at Fort Pitt had been unusually fine; 1884 had turned into 1885 with hardly a break in the succession of delightfully clear days. It was March and the few permanent residents, with irrepressible optimism, were already speaking hopefully of the prospects for an early spring. Travel along the North Saskatchewan river was brisk, and each day brought its quota of itinerants: government officials, Hudson's Bay Company and independent traders, missionaries, freighters, and trappers—red, white, and mixed. The tiny settlement's name was more imposing than its tactical situation. Not even the palisades and bastions of the Hudson's Bay Company post or the barracks of the North West Mounted Police could offset the weakness of its location one hundred yards back from the river on a flat dominated by an eminence. But the Saskatchewan—river of shifting channel and sandbars—was deep and rapid here, and fully three hundred yards wide, an advantage too great to be ignored.

Built by the Hudson's Bay Company in 1831, Fort Pitt admirably served its purpose as an intermediate point between Edmonton, 200 miles to the west, and Fort Carlton, almost as far in an opposite direction. It had never been a Company post in the ordinary sense of the word; only pemmican from the adjacent prairies and a few beaver brought in by the Woods Crees were its harvest. It was important as a port of call, a stopping place in winter and in summer. Even in summer, when the mighty brigades of the traders gave colour to the great river, visitors from the East eagerly looked forward to their first glimpse of Fort Pitt as the dividing line between prairie and northern forest. They were amply repaid in their expectations. Sweeping around a curve in the

river one met a scene of beauty; the broad waters lapping the flat on the north bank carried the eye beyond to the gradually rising land clothed with thick aspen and poplar bush, intermingled with the rich green of the spruce that signalled the end of monotonous prairie; the south shore, with its regular rising terraces, was almost parklike at first glance—a scene of peaceful charm.

If Fort Pitt failed to justify its name in appearance it likewise gave no indication of its stormy history. The swift-flowing stream at its feet, the dark forests behind failed to suggest the blood-spattered story which had been enacted within their compass. Nor was the significance of some of the names of the district's landmarks—Battle River, Four Blackfoot Hills, Neutral Hills—fully appreciated, except by a few. Occasionally an older resident or one of the passing traders of a previous generation would grow reminiscent. He might tell of the days when the brigades of the traders and the canoes of the solitary trappers stole silently and furtively to the protection of the Company's walls. He might speak of the events and traditions of the warfare between those deadly and hereditary enemies—the Crees and the Blackfeet. The story would be an unveiling of the character of the two strongest and most opposed savage tribes in the Northwest.

Fort Pitt was "No Man's Land" in those days. Such it was to the Crees when the lordly Blackfeet, who recognized no limitations, made sportive raids into their midst. The Blackfeet roamed at will from the far south country of the Missouri to north of the Saskatchewan and beyond. The Crees, unless goaded beyond discretion or instigated by a particularly daring leader, kept to their Saskatchewan country and to the south-east. Not even the Hudson's Bay Company had managed to penetrate the Blackfoot country proper, and stay. Its ventures at Old Bow Fort and Chesterfield House had been unsuccessful and were withdrawn. The legends of

the Crees were all interwoven with the successes of their bravest and most cunning chiefs against their foes or their allies in the Blackfoot Confederacy—the Bloods, the Peigans and the Sarcees; there was no legend of their defeats, unless a burning hatred of their enemies was its expression. Nor did the Crees dissimulate their hatred. The tribe, which in sign language was represented by two tongues—liars—was truthful enough in this one respect at least.

But the advent of government had changed all this. With the transfer of the title to the Northwest from the Hudson's Bay Company to Canada an instant change took place. Before six years had elapsed treaties with both tribes had been concluded which restricted each to its own district; another seven years saw almost all the tribes located on their allotted reserves. With the prairies cleared of the roaming marauders an influx of settlers took place. The new railway spanning the plains cut through the heart of the Blackfoot country. The buffalo disappeared forever. Not until then did the Indians of the plains realize how completely they had been their complement. The noble, if unappreciated animals, had provided their tents, their blankets and beds, boats and daily food, powder flasks, bow-strings, lariats, saddles, bridles, reins, bits and even the parchment upon which they recorded their history. Their seemingly inexhaustible numbers had been proof of a legend that the Indians would never want so long as they enjoyed the favour of the Great Spirit. And now they were gone. The Indians who had signed treaty but had not yet accepted the restrictions imposed by confinement on reserves experienced actual distress; those who still held out against treaty were destitute. Their privations forced both classes into line with their more tractable brothers who obtained some relief on the reserves.

Most obdurate of all the chiefs was Big Bear, powerful leader of the plains Crees. With a camp of 500 lodges, all in

wretched condition, he remained obstinate. In 1879 he refused treaty because of the penal clause respecting hanging; in 1882 he led his followers to the vicinity of Fort Walsh, but refused government assistance to go north to Fort Pitt, his own district, where it was proposed to establish new reserves. The band continued their miserable attempts to gain a livelihood from hunting on the prairie but cold weather and insufficient food wore them down and they finally submitted. Big Bear signed treaty and promised to go north the following spring. The old chief knew that his days of freedom to wander where his fancy led were almost at an end. The treaty money and provisions gave him a brief respite, but the pressure of the Mounted Police continued until finally he turned with his band toward the Saskatchewan. The relief felt in the south at their departure was equalled only by the apprehension of the settlers and authorities in the north at their arrival. All along the Saskatchewan there was a feeling that events were shaping themselves for a crisis. The half-breeds were murmuring; the Indians were sullen, angry and hungry; the instinctive sympathy of one for the other was disturbing.

It was not long before Big Bear's followers made their presence felt at Fort Pitt. In September, 1883, their attitude was so threatening that a force of twenty-five Mounted Police under Inspector Dickens was sent there to establish a post. The following year a separate detachment of five men was sent to Frog Lake, thirty-five miles north, a little hamlet recently established where traders, Indian Department officials and missionaries served the needs of the numerous Indians living in the vicinity. Another reserve, that of Onion Lake, was between the two places.

Big Bear did not remain in the district. In a few months his band was scattered all over the country hunting. Again he had temporized and promised to choose his reserve soon. With the departure of the Cree chief and his quarrelsome fol-

lowers the settlement at Fort Pitt recovered its optimism. The people, with few exceptions, felt that their fear had been unfounded. After all, the Indians at Frog Lake were prospering and contented on their reserves, and the presence of the police was an assurance that Big Bear would be kept in hand were he to return. The officer commanding the Mounted Police thought differently; he had information which increased rather than reduced his fears—fears of one who was not a novice at the game.

Inspector Francis Jeffrey Dickens had had wide and varied experience in his present line of work. It was a long stretch from the literary circle of his illustrious father, Charles Dickens, at Gad's Hill to the office of District Superintendent of the Bengal Police in India; then, after a sorrowful return to England, occasioned by his father's death, a still longer move to the prairies and forests of the new world. The problems, however, were not dissimilar. The tension of the decade or so following the Indian Mutiny and the necessity for tact and understanding in dealing with the natives had almost their replicas in the present situation in Canada.

The Inspector's service in the North West Mounted Police, dating from November, 1874, had carried him from Winnipeg to Swan River, the Saskatchewan country, Fort Walsh, Fort MacLeod and now back to the great river. His duties had been a reflection of the state of the country; his contact with the Indians continuous. He had seen ugly situations arise; occasions when the murderous rage of the red men had been curbed only by the coolness and determination of the police opposing them. The police had been fortunate, he knew. So had the West; much more than it realized. Courage and determination would not always suffice. And there was no set formula for all occasions: the iron of firm adherence to a given course must occasionally yield to the elasticity of compromise. The strain of decision was wearing.

An incident at Blackfoot Crossing in 1881 often came back to his mind. The police under his command had arrested a minor chief for shooting at a white man. Immediately they were surrounded by a large number of threatening Blackfeet demanding the prisoner's release. The position of his party had been hopeless, greatly outnumbered as they were and without defences of any kind other than their arms. He had had to decide. Stubborn refusal to see the situation would have been bravado—and suicide. Chance intervened. Crowfoot, mighty chief of all the Blackfeet, had appeared, had pledged himself to procure the prisoner's presence whenever called upon. Crowfoot was a chief of demonstrated honour. It was a way out. Without loss of dignity he had been able to agree to the course suggested, for the time being. But the moral effect was bad; such a precedent must not be permitted. A senior officer of the Force had therefore been sent with reinforcements, after defences had been prepared, to seize the prisoner from the exultant Blackfeet and to try him for his offence. This time iron determination succeeded; the prisoner was taken into custody, and removed for trial. The Indians had been overawed.

Another similar incident had recently occurred near Battleford. He had not been there but the senior officer of the Blackfoot episode had played a like rôle. The same opposition had developed; the first attempt to arrest had failed in the face of taunting resistance. Again a larger force had accomplished the seemingly impossible, and no bloodshed had resulted. An unexplainable something, almost a superstitious awe of the intrepidity of the police, had kept the twitching fingers of the "Thirst Dance" maddened braves from the fatal tug at the triggers which would have precipitated bloody chaos.

Big Bear had been there. Big Bear! The name had come to have a sinister ring in his ears. His actions defied analysis. Was he the hypocritical schemer that some believed him to be, or were his professions of good faith and good intentions

genuine? In any event, there was not even assumed friendliness in the manners of some of his followers, of some of his sons. There were those who in their desire to reassure themselves urged that he was peaceful; that in time he would settle down with his followers on a reserve, as most of the Crees already had done. Perhaps! But there were many signs to the contrary. Why had he met Louis Riel, the Métis leader back from his exile in the United States, a few weeks after the Battleford disturbance? What was behind these conferences with Poundmaker and other chiefs? It seemed more than a coincidence that trouble had followed in the wake of his tents like a shadow.

It was true that the Cree chief had again signed treaty the preceding October and had promised definitely to select his reserve when the snow went. But that was only after interminable argument and explanation, after firm resistance to impertinent demands. The demands—was it significant?—had been made by Little Poplar, a minor chief really outside of Big Bear's fold. The Bear himself had been violently abusive; had assailed the Hudson's Bay Company with bitter invective and had repudiated the debts of his followers to the Company. Strangely enough, as soon as the treaty money was paid over the Crees had settled all their debts, and in a short time had spent more than \$1000.00 at the store. At the ensuing big dance given by the Company the Indians had seemed good natured again.

Now they were at Frog Lake and, as latest reports showed, in utterly wretched condition, poorly clothed, and destitute of food, except when supplied with provisions by the Indian Agent there. Even the horses were suffering and several had died. No big game had been shot at Frog Lake and to obtain the necessities of life Big Bear's followers had been compelled to submit to the implications of Agent Quinn's dictum: "No work, no food." As a result they had reluctantly

agreed to work at cutting wood. It was ominous indeed that in such a condition and with no big game to shoot, they had, at the expense of their bellies, been buying fixed ammunition and hoarding it away. An urgent recommendation to the Government that this practice be prohibited and that only powder and shot be sold had produced no effect.

Neither by sign nor by action did Inspector Dickens show his misgivings. To the people of Fort Pitt he continued to be the silent, slightly gloomy individual of their acquaintance; a man whose seeming habit of introspection was undoubtedly enhanced by the affliction of deafness daily growing more apparent. His familiar, slight figure with the distinctive reddish beard was a part of their daily life. His reports to his superiors were more revealing; each reflected his watchfulness for a sign which would confirm his doubts and fears, and summarized the observations of his secret scouts and the regular members of his command. A steady stream of despatches passed between Frog Lake, Fort Pitt, and Battleford.

On February 20th Big Bear and Lone Man, his son-in-law, accompanied by the Councillors of the band, appeared at Fort Pitt to complain about Agent Quinn's action at Frog Lake in warning them that until they selected a reserve they would have to work for their food as the other Indians had to do. They received short shrift but took advantage of their visit to obtain provisions from the Hudson's Bay Company in return for their services in freighting supplies back to Frog Lake. Immediately following this the police reports from the scouts, the men on patrol and at Frog Lake became more encouraging. It began to leak out that all was not peace and harmony in the ranks of Big Bear's followers; that a number were talking about joining other bands on the reserves at Frog Lake and had even made formal application to that end. Big Bear continued stubborn. To all importunities he replied that he was "going slowly, slowly" to his reserve, and muttered

something about seeing the lieutenant-governor before he finally decided.

The reports received at Fort Pitt from the other Mounted Police posts and detachments along the Saskatchewan, particularly those to the east, were not reassuring. From every direction word came of uneasiness and unrest among the Indians and half-breeds. An unusual activity for the season was being shown in the movement of both classes from one Indian reserve or half-breed settlement to another. The object and justification of all such movements outside of their own localities were carefully investigated in the Fort Pitt district. Two Indians—God's Wind and Little White Bear—were the latest to receive the Inspector's personal attention. They had arrived from Little Pine's reserve, situated south-east of Pitt, and were on a visit to the reserves at Frog Lake and others in the direction of Edmonton, on their way from the Blackfoot country to the south. After a detention of four days they were permitted to proceed.

On the surface life moved with monotonous regularity. The officers' new quarters were "muddled"—an operation involving the indiscriminate use of mud and straw; the buildings and corrals were repaired; riding instruction was given the men; inspection of barracks at regular intervals; reports and returns. The significant incidents of each day were duly recorded in Inspector Dickens' diary.

Wednesday, March 4, (1885).

Fine weather.

Todd (Halfbreed) trader arrived from Battleford en route to Frog Lake. Wells and Baker (breeds) arrived from B'ford en route to Frog Lake with flour for the Indian Dept. D.L.S. Laurie arrived from Frog Lake.<sup>1</sup>

<sup>1</sup>Evidently one of the Government surveyors sent out along the Saskatchewan.

Thursday, March 5.

Fine weather. Snow fell during night. J. Pritchard and H. Quinn<sup>2</sup> arrived from Frog Lake en route to B'frd. D.L.S. Laurie left for B'frd. P. Ballandyne arrived from B'frd. M. McDonald<sup>3</sup> arrived from B'frd with freight for the Hudson's Bay Co'y.

Friday, March 6.

Fine weather. P. Ballandyne left for Frog Lake. Wells and Baker (freighters) returned to B'frd.

Saturday, March 7.

Fine weather. General fatigue. Freighters (Wells and Baker) returned to B'frd from Frog Lake.<sup>4</sup>

Sunday, March 8.

Fine weather. Indians arrived from Island Lake to trade.

Monday, March 9.

Fine weather, but cold. Mr. Cameron (H. B. Co'y)<sup>5</sup> arrived from Frog Lake.

Tuesday, March 10.

Dull weather and cold. Indians (freighters) arrived from Frog Lake for freight for H. B. Co'y. Lucky Man's son returned from B'frd.<sup>6</sup>

Wednesday, March 11.

Fine weather. Mr. Cameron returned to Frog Lake.

<sup>2</sup>Two Halfbreeds at Frog Lake who were to play important rôles in subsequent events.

<sup>3</sup>Malcolm McDonald, an ex-Mounted Police guide.

<sup>4</sup>Evidently a repetition of the previous day's entry in error.

<sup>5</sup>William Bleasdell Cameron, who was to play a unique rôle in subsequent events. He was an employee of the Hudson's Bay Company at this time and had formerly been an independent trader in the district. He has written a most vivid account of his experiences during this period. See *The War Trail of Big Bear*, by W. B. Cameron: Duckworth, and the Ryerson Press, 1927.

<sup>6</sup>Lucky Man was another Indian who was not induced to accept a reserve until 1882.

Thursday, March 12.

Fine weather. Louis Sayer's outfit of carts arrived from B'frd en route to Onion Lake for Barley.

Friday, March 13.

Fine weather. J. Pritchard and H. Quinn arrived from B'frd and left for Frog Lake.

Saturday, March 14.

Fine weather. Peter Ballantyne<sup>7</sup> arrived from Frog Lake and reports Big Bear has promised to take a reserve 35 miles from Frog Lake on the Skn (Saskatchewan) river<sup>8</sup> P. Sayer's outfit of carts with seed grain for I. D.<sup>9</sup> passed en route to B'frd.

Sunday, March 15.

Rough weather. Mail arrived at 8 a.m. I.A. Quinn and F.I. Mann<sup>10</sup> arrived for mail. Snow storm this evening.

Monday, March 16.

Fine weather. Rev. Chas. Quinney arrived from Onion Lake.<sup>11</sup> C. Bremner arrived from Battle River from trading with Salteaux Indians. P. Ballantyne with Big Bear's son left for B'frd.<sup>12</sup> Rev. Chas. Quinney returned to Onion Lake.

Tuesday, March 17.

Fine weather. Mail left for B'frd. Gondon and Downey arrived from B'frd with freight for Ind. Ag't., Frog Lake.

Wednesday, March 18.

Fine weather. Snow. Very hot. Snow melting fast.

<sup>7</sup>This name is spelled in various fashions in the diary.

<sup>8</sup>This was the first time Big Bear had mentioned a definite location.

<sup>9</sup>The name should, probably, read Louis Sayer, as in the entry of March 12; I. D. refers to the Indian Department.

<sup>10</sup>Farm Instructor Mann of the Indian Department at Onion Lake.

<sup>11</sup>Church of England Missionary at Onion Lake.

<sup>12</sup>Big Bear had several sons. It is not known to which this entry refers.

Thursday, March 19.

Fine weather. Consts. Anderson and Tector returned from Frog Lake. Le Cotaui arrives from Frog Lake to trade. Pembrum arrived from Turtle Lake with freight for H. B. Co'y. The Crane (Indian) arrived from Frog Lake en route to B'frd.

Friday, March 20.

Weather cold and dull. Mr. McLean<sup>13</sup> left for Onion Lake.

Saturday, March 21.

Fine weather. J. Alexander (guide)<sup>14</sup> left for Frog Lake on special duty.

Sunday, March 22.

Fine weather. Rev. Chas. Quinney arrived and held services.<sup>15</sup>

Monday, March 23.

Fine weather. Rev. Chas. Quinney returned home. Indian Pa-too-way-sic-owin left for B'frd with despatch for O.C. B'frd.<sup>16</sup> Sayers and Nault (halfbreed freighters) arrived from B'frd. Rumours abroad to the effect that the Halfbreeds are in arms against the Government.<sup>17</sup>

Tuesday, March 24.

Fine weather. Indian Crooked Neck arrived from Onion

<sup>13</sup>W. J. McLean, the Chief District Officer for the Hudson's Bay Company at Fort Pitt.

<sup>14</sup>Josie Alexander, the Mounted Police scout and guide at Fort Pitt.

<sup>15</sup>Divine service was held irregularly at Fort Pitt. There was no clergyman stationed there permanently, but the Church of England and the Roman Catholic Church had their representatives on the adjacent reserves.

<sup>16</sup>This was evidently a rush message to the Officer Commanding the Mounted Police at Battleford, occasioned by the rumours being brought into the district.

<sup>17</sup>Although the first actual outbreak had not yet occurred, rumours of the actions of the Halfbreeds on the 17th and subsequently at Batoche were spreading about the country in distorted form like wildfire.

Lake to trade. Guide Josie Alexander returned from Frog Lake.

Wednesday, March 25.

Fine weather. Slight rain in morning. MacDonald left for Onion Lake for freight for H. B. Co'y. Indians Mistonean<sup>18</sup> and Toqnis, the former a messenger, arrived from B'frd with despatch. Const. Anderson left for Frog Lake with despatches.

Thursday, March 26.<sup>19</sup>

Fine weather. Antoine Fontaine (messenger, arrived on horseback from B'ford, with despatches. Const. Cowan<sup>20</sup> and Guide J. Alexander left on horseback on special service returning in afternoon. Todd (trader) arrived from Frog Lake en route to B'frd. Corp. Sleigh<sup>21</sup> and Const. Anderson arrived from Frog Lake with Andre Nault (Breed) suspected of being a courier of Riel.<sup>22</sup>

Friday, March 27.

Fine weather. Antoine Fontaine left for B'frd with despatches. Andre Nault examined by Insp. Dickens, who dismissed him with caution.<sup>23</sup> Ny-wag-o-sis (Indian) arrived from Onion Lake with potatoes for detachment.

Saturday, March 28.

Fine weather. Slight fall of snow during night. Corp.

<sup>18</sup>Evidently another police messenger bringing further reports.

<sup>19</sup>The Duck Lake engagement between the police force and the "breeds" took place on March 26th; the government force suffered severe losses and had to retire to avoid worse.

<sup>20</sup>Const. Cowan gave his life in the later events at Fort Pitt.

<sup>21</sup>Corp. Sleigh, the N.C.O. in charge of the Frog Lake detachment; he was later killed at Cut Knife Hill.

<sup>22</sup>Andre Nault's part in inciting the Indians was never satisfactorily established. He was tried on this charge but sufficient evidence could not be adduced and he was acquitted.

<sup>23</sup>Had Inspector Dickens known of the engagement at Duck Lake it is possible Nault would have been kept in custody.

Sleigh and Andre Nault left for B'frd.<sup>24</sup> Big Bear's son and Lucky Man's son arrived from B'frd.

Sunday, March 29.

Fine weather. J. Pritchard and P. Budreau arrived from Frog Lake for mail. Mail arrived from B'frd. Camped across river.

Monday, March 30.

Fine weather. Mail crossed river and distributed. Messenger Mis-trim-yan arrived from B'frd with despatches. Constable Anderson left for Frog Lake with despatch. News brought in of an engagement or skirmish between the police and the breeds in the vicinity of Carlton<sup>25</sup>. Extra guards posted in and around the Fort during night.<sup>26</sup>

Tuesday, March 31.

Cold weather. Mail left for B'frd. Corp. Sleigh and Frog Lake detachment arrived from Frog Lake.<sup>27</sup> Messenger Mis-trim-yan left for B'frd. Snow storm in evening.

Wednesday, April 1.

Fine morning. Heavy fall of snow during night. Sgt.

<sup>24</sup>There is something wrong in this entry. Corp. Sleigh could not have gone to Battleford and returned between March 28th and 30th when he was at Frog Lake. He may have gone part of the way with Nault to make certain of the latter's destination.

<sup>25</sup>This was the first definite word of the engagement at Duck Lake. The message came from Mr. Rae, Indian Agent at Battleford, and said that the country was in a state of rebellion, and that the Battleford Indians were greatly excited. It asked that every effort be made to prevent Big Bear and his people from starting for Battleford. Inspector Dickens at once sent word to Agent Quinn at Frog Lake advising him to come to Fort Pitt if he considered there was any serious danger, and offering to reinforce him in the event of his deciding to stay. Mr. Quinn replied that the Indians were perfectly quiet and that he was confident that he could keep them at Frog Lake by feeding them and treating them kindly.

<sup>26</sup>From this date Fort Pitt was to all intents and purposes prepared for attack and in a state of siege.

<sup>27</sup>The detachment at Frog Lake was ordered in by Agent Quinn, who wrote to Inspector Dickens that their presence excited the Indians there. News of the outbreak at Duck Lake had reached Big Bear almost as soon as it did Inspector Dickens.

Martin<sup>28</sup> left for Onion Lake returning in afternoon. Hudson's Bay teams left for Frog Lake with freight.

Thursday, April 2.

Fine morning. Const. Roby left for Onion Lake with team for lumber, returning in afternoon. He reports Indians very excited on reserve.

Friday, April 3.

Fine weather. Mr. Mann (F.I.), wife and family arrived from Onion Lake at 1 a.m., he reports that Indians at Frog Lake have massacred all the whites. Fatigue all night barricading Fort. Extra guards posted, etc. Henry Quinn arrived from Frog Lake having escaped the massacre, confirms reports of Indians risen. Mr. Quinney and wife arrived from Onion Lake escorted by Chief Saskatchewan.<sup>29</sup> Guide Josie Alexander left for B'frd with despatch.

Saturday, April 4.

Fine weather. Extra precautions taken to protect Fort. Johnny Saskatchewan arrived from B'frd with despatch, reports general rising throughout the country, left same morning for B'frd with despatch. Le Cotau (Poplar's brother) arrived from Onion Lake confirms report of massacre; reports H. B. Co'y employees safe, also the women. False alarm at 11.30, another at 4.<sup>30</sup>

Sunday, April 5.

Necotan, Indian, arrived from Onion Lake with families. Reports Big Bear due at Bighills to-day, also that some of the Indians are inclined to leave him. Stables levelled in afternoon.<sup>31</sup> False alarm during night.

<sup>28</sup>Senior non-commissioned officer stationed at Fort Pitt.

<sup>29</sup>The Indians at Onion Lake made no hostile move against the whites there; some of them were very friendly.

<sup>30</sup>The tension at Fort Pitt during those days is well shown in the recurring false alarms.

<sup>31</sup>This was part of the preparations for placing Fort Pitt in a better state of defence.

Monday, April 6.

Severe snowstorm during night and morning. General systems adopted for general use. A Special Constable sworn in.<sup>32</sup> Flying sentries taken off and sentries posted in each post through portholes. Nothing unusual to-day.

Tuesday, April 7.

Fine weather. Everything quiet last night. Magazine torn down. Little Poplar and 9 tepees arrived from B'frd; he asked for beef and provisions, proposed talking it over in morning.<sup>33</sup> Everything quiet during night.

Wednesday, April 8.

Fine weather. Grub taken over to Little Poplar. Stockade and Bastion built during day. (Bastion to command the back of Fort). Little Poplar reports that Indians have burnt houses at Onion Lake.<sup>34</sup> Nothing unusual last night.

Thursday, April 9.

Fine weather. Rev. Chas. Quinney left to scout across river, returning in morning. Indian Necotan persuaded Little Poplar to bring his camp to the bank of the river. Extra bastion built behind orderly room. Everything quiet during night.

Friday, April 10.

Fine weather. Francois Dufresne<sup>35</sup> and Necotan left to scout; they went as far as Onion Lake and report no Indians there. Indians burnt down farmhouse and priest's house before leaving, taking all provisions with exception of some 50 bags of flour. Mr. Quinney scouted across the river, reports

<sup>32</sup>Henry Quinn, nephew of the Agent at Frog Lake, who had escaped from there on the 2nd of April. He had seen the whites made prisoners but was not a witness of any actual violence.

<sup>33</sup>Little Poplar was the stormy petrel of the district, who was just as likely to be friendly as the reverse.

<sup>34</sup>This was correct.

<sup>35</sup>A Hudson's Bay Company half-breed employee.

3 tepees of Little Poplar's band missing. Nothing unusual during night.

Saturday, April 11.

Fine weather. Sentries posted outside during day. Started to build scow in day.<sup>36</sup> Horses exercised. Everything quiet last night.

Sunday, April 12.

Fine weather but windy. Large quantity ice drifted down river. Divine service in morning. Horses exercised in morning. Dogs very uneasy during night. Fire signals supposed to have been seen by No. 1 sentry (behind Mission House) during night.

Monday, April 13.

Fine weather. Consts. Loasby, Cowan and Quinn left on a scouting expedition to Frog Lake. A number of Indians arrived from Frog Lake, sent a letter demanding that police lay down their arms and leave the place, they report prisoners safe. Mr. Halpin<sup>37</sup> accompanied them acting as Secatary (sic). Mr. McLean parleyed with them and gave them grub. By contents of letter it appears 250 armed men are around Fort.<sup>38</sup> Chief Little Poplar crossed over to help McLean in pacifying Indians. Everything quiet during night.

Tuesday, April 14.

Very windy weather. Mr. McLean still parleying with Indians. During parley the three scouts out yesterday rode through the camp. Const. Cowan was shot dead and Loasby wounded in two places. Quinn got away. Indians were fired

<sup>36</sup>The scow was a tacit admission that a retreat down the river might be necessary.

<sup>37</sup>H. R. Halpin, post manager for the Hudson's Bay Company at Cold Lake, 40 miles north of Frog Lake, one of the prisoners of the Crees.

<sup>38</sup>The total population of Fort Pitt at this time, including women and children, was probably under seventy. There were less than twenty-five Mounted Police there.

upon.<sup>39</sup> McLean and Dufresne taken prisoners. Indians threatened to burn fort tonight unless police left. After a great deal of danger got to the other side of river. All the white people and halfbreeds in Pitt went to the Indian Camp as prisoners.

Wednesday, April 15.

Very cold weather. Travelled.

The entries in a diary, however suggestive, are too succinct to do justice to the horrors which had taken place between March 31st and the bald statement under the date of April 15th—"travelled", itself just as non-revealing. The anxiety occasioned Inspector Dickens by the involuntary withdrawal of the Frog Lake detachment was not lessened by the receipt of information from other quarters. The reports brought in by the whites at Onion Lake were more than confirmed by Quinn's story of the virtual imprisonment of all the whites and some of the half-breeds there; by his statement that he had heard the sound of rifle fire while he was making his escape. Still nothing was definitely known regarding actual killings or, if any, the number involved. The Onion Lake report might be exaggerated, might be entirely untrue. The uncertainty was wracking. But the next few days left little doubt. Confirmation came from too many sources, including friendly Indians.

It was some time before the full story was learned in all its terrible details. The contest of wills between Agent Tom Quinn and Wandering Spirit, the war chief of the Crees, had provided the outlet for the Crees' frenzy. It came in all its fury on Holy Thursday, April 2nd. Wandering Spirit was thirsty for blood. The signs were many and ominous. All the whites and half-breeds recognized the danger signals. So did Quinn; but his position of authority among the Indians

<sup>39</sup>By the inmates of the Fort.

would not permit him to accept their dictation. Already there had been several conflicts; but the climax came when the war chief ordered the Indian Agent to go to the Indians' camp. Quinn refused. Wandering Spirit shot him dead.

It was the signal. A general massacre broke out. It did not stop until nine men, including the two Roman Catholic missionaries—Fathers Fafard and Marchand—had been sacrificed. Cameron of the Hudson's Bay Company, the only white man, and a few half-breeds were made prisoners. Others from Onion Lake and Cold Lake were taken later. Big Bear had returned from the hunting the previous afternoon to find that the last semblance of authority had slipped from his hands during his absence. As soon as the shooting started he tried to stop it but his efforts were unavailing. His own son, Imasees, was the war chief's supporter, and the most eager of all the Crees for action against the whites.

The frantic efforts of the police and civilians at Fort Pitt to strengthen the defences during the next week must have been inspired by a premonition of what was actually to happen; and the work was a relief from the gnawing fears that refused to be recognized. With less than fifty as the total strength, their final step was clear in its inevitability, and the start to build a scow on the 11th of April indicated the best end they could hope for in ultimate flight down the river. While the defenders worked, a scouting party set out to learn what was taking place at Frog Lake.

The crisis was not long delayed. Scarcely had the scouts disappeared from sight when Big Bear's band appeared on the hillside behind the Fort. A peremptory message was sent forward; the police were to lay down their arms and surrender. Inspector Dickens' reply was curt, and his refusal equally decisive.

A council of the Indians met to consider the situation. A direct attack on the Fort, with its certain heavy losses, was not

an agreeable prospect, and the more moderate element urged that the police be permitted to retire without blood being shed. By this time there were two distinct factions in the Cree camp. The Woods Crees, inherently of a more peaceable inclination, viewed with disfavour the excesses of their more ferocious kinsmen from the plains; and on several occasions, principally in behalf of the white prisoners, they had not hesitated to assert themselves. As they greatly outnumbered Big Bear's band it was expedient at times for Wandering Spirit and Imasees to defer to their objections.

The restless, murderous malevolence of Wandering Spirit was something that few would ordinarily dare to arouse; but faced with the present determined resistance led by a trained, prepared force, all the wavering or more moderate factions united with Big Bear who seized the opportunity to endeavour to regain his ancient authority. Another message was sent notifying the police that they would be permitted to retire from the Fort without molestation. Inspector Dickens refused to alter his earlier decision.

With the failure of direct methods the natural cunning of the Crees asserted itself. Guile was more successful. By a ruse they made prisoners of W. J. McLean, chief district officer of the Hudson's Bay Company, and Francois Dufresne, the interpreter who accompanied him from the shelter of the Fort to conduct in the open the conference invited by the Indians.

The excitement occasioned by this betrayal had not subsided when a ghastly drama was enacted before the eyes of the watchers within the Fort. The scouts who had left the previous day for Frog Lake suddenly rode into the open, saw at once the danger of their position in the unexpected presence of the Indians they had thought were far behind, and attempted to race past the camp for the Fort, their only hope.

It was all over in a few breathless moments. Constable Cowan's horse balked, he dropped from the saddle and ran; a shot rang out and he dropped dead, shot through the heart. Lone Man, one of the Cree stalwarts, all the instincts of the Indian warrior and hunter aroused, mounted and spurred after Constable Loasby. Another shot, two more; wounded in both thighs, his horse down, Loasby collapsed. A hail of bullets from the Fort drove Lone Man away from the prey he believed to be dead. Loasby, with a last mighty effort, staggered to his feet and into the arms of the men from the Fort who had hurried to his assistance.<sup>40</sup> The third scout, Henry Quinn, the special constable, made his escape into the brush up the river, only to be captured the next morning, after a night of extreme hardship.<sup>41</sup>

The taste of blood aroused all the latent ferocity of the Crees. Their threats and preparations to attack and burn the Fort during the night, unless all the civilians surrendered and the police withdrew, were so impressive that McLean wrote to his wife advising her and all the Company employees to comply with the Indians' demands.

The day was cold and windy, and the possibilities presented by the threats of the besiegers were so terrible to contemplate that the civilians decided to follow McLean's advice, against that of Inspector Dickens.

With his responsibility for his charges removed, the police officer decided to abandon the Fort. Torn between grief for their fallen comrades and angry reluctance to retreat without striking a blow in return, the police began their preparations. After considerable difficulty the scow was launched and, carrying the wounded man with them, the garrison prepared to cross the river.

<sup>40</sup>C. M. Loasby recovered from his wounds. He is still living, and resides in Vancouver.

<sup>41</sup>Henry Quinn owed his life to a minor chief of the Woods Crees who claimed him as his prisoner from Wandering Spirit.

The Saskatchewan was filled with great blocks of ice, and the current was swift. The scow let in water rapidly, and several times the awkward craft nearly swamped. Momentarily expecting attack, the crossing was finally effected, and camp made for the night. The sufferings of the first night were intense. It was extremely cold; the wet clothing of the men froze to their backs, and many were frost-bitten.

For six days the party continued its perilous journey. Progress was very slow. Camping at convenient islands, miserable with cold, wind and wet; constantly alert for roaming hostiles; hampered and endangered by the ice pressing against their clumsy craft; haunted by thoughts of what might be happening at Fort Pitt, they managed to make their way to Battleford. Their enthusiastic reception by the police and civilians, the strains of the band music that played them into the fort, were as nothing compared to their feelings of relief on their release from the hardships and anxieties of the past few weeks. The sweets of a brief respite from responsibility, a realization that their worries could be transferred to other shoulders acted as a tonic.

Battleford had had its own worries. For nearly a month it had been in a state of siege; all the townspeople had fled for protection, half a mile distant, until there were 530 persons sheltered within the enclosure. The arrival of an equal number of troops and police but a day or two before had been a joyful scene. Following their own experiences, the people could appreciate the plight of the Fort Pitt party.

Inspector Dickens expressed no emotion. The small, silent figure remained as taciturn as ever. But his thoughts could not have been cheerful. Once again he had been obliged to make a decision under harrowing circumstances, to see his judgment disregarded, and his wishes thwarted. He had no choice in the decision of the Fort Pitt civilians to go as prisoners to Big Bear's camp; his request of the whites at Frog Lake

to come under his protection had been refused. He could not have averted either of those tragedies; yet they had occurred. What would his superiors, his brother-officers, think? He soon learned, as did all Canada, that the general uprising along the Saskatchewan had not permitted of ordinary measures of defence. Duck Lake was one illustration; the retreat from Fort Carlton another; Fish Creek and others were still to happen.

Retribution for the horrors of Frog Lake, for the death of Cowan and the wounding of Loasby was not far away. On August 1st Wandering Spirit was delivered over at Battleford as a prisoner—to Inspector Dickens of all officers in the Force—on his way to the scaffold; a few months later the sentence of death was carried out against Miserable Man and other, Frog Lake murderers; a few Indians, including Big Bear, were given penitentiary terms.

But the strain of the past few months, added to that of the previous ten years, had been too great for a constitution never robust. Inspector Dickens' deafness had become such a handicap that he withdrew from the Mounted Police soon after the Northwest troubles had subsided, in the hope of enjoying a rest before turning to other activities. In another manner than he expected was this hope realized. He died, suddenly, while on a visit to Moline, Illinois, on June 11th, 1886, at the age of forty-one. Another name on the roll of the pioneers who failed to reap the harvest of their sowing!



